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# Higher Education and Research in times of War and Peace: Key Insights from the 2022 FREE Network Conference

*More than thirty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Europe is struck with war following the Russian aggression on Ukraine. Russia's war on Ukraine entails lost human capital, both in actual lives lost and due to major disruptions to key functions of the society, such as education and research. In light of this, the FREE Network, together with the Centre for Economic Analysis (CenEA) and the Stockholm Institute of Transition Economics (SITE), hosted the public conference "**Higher Education and Research in War and Peace**" in Warsaw on the 10th of September 2022. This policy brief is based on the presentations and panel discussions held during the conference.*

The large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has disrupted an entire society, including the education system, with Ukrainian schools just recently partially welcoming back students to the class rooms for the first time since the 25th of February 2022. Closing schools has severe impacts on a population, as highlighted by the recent Covid-19 pandemic. The lockdown and closure of schools around the world following the virus have had, and will continue to have massive negative consequences globally, with severe losses in human capital due to lost years of education. This especially in countries where access to online education is limited or of poor quality. Inequalities also rise following the closure of schools and girls return to school in fewer number than their male counterparts. The disruption to the Ukrainian education system will result in lost human capital and lowered levels of knowledge among the population. The war has further restricted access to relevant information for many Ukrainians but also for Russians, making people susceptible to the increased Russian propaganda and misinformation about the war on Ukraine depicted within and outside of Russia.

In light of this, the FREE Network gathered representatives from its affiliated institutions and other relevant actors in the region to discuss the relevance and necessity of continued support for higher education and research within social sciences in Ukraine, and more broadly in the Eastern Europe and post-Soviet countries. The conference and the overarching theme related back not only to the original ambition of the FREE Network, namely to support outstanding academia within economics and relate it to policy work, but also to the current situation in Europe and the existing threat from Russia to this objective.

This brief will initially cover the work carried out by the Kiev School of Economics (KSE) in response to the Russian aggression, followed by thoughts on Russia's role in the evolution of knowledge and human capital in the region. The brief continues by

covering the benefits and positive outcomes of investments into education and research and lastly concludes with reflections on the role of the FREE Network.

## The Kiev School of Economics' Response to the Russian Aggression

The war on Ukraine put the spotlight on the importance of high-quality academic institutions as a safety net for the government to maintain vital functions to society. The Vice President for Policy Research at KSE, Nataliia Shapoval, gave a brief overview of how KSE's work has changed since the Russian war on Ukraine and its implications. Shapoval initially painted a picture of the disruption to the Ukrainian society caused by the Russian aggression, explaining how KSE stepped up during the first months of the war, in some areas doing the work of ministries. While the government has mainly taken back some duties, the KSE is still providing policy advice in areas related to the effects of sanctions, estimates of damages, and food security among others. KSE is also highly active within the areas of education and health, working with Ukrainian schools through the KSE Charitable Foundation (KSE CF) to ensure students can safely return to the classrooms.

Another important aspect of the work carried out by KSE concern spreading knowledge about and shedding light on the situation in Ukraine. Through the various networks, by talking to colleagues within academia but also to the media, KSE is trying to explain what has happened and is still happening in Ukraine. According to Shapoval, there is a need for delivering correct information and to keep attention fixed on the situation in Ukraine such that people are kept aware on what is going on in the region.

Shapoval also regularly returned to the role of education and research for the present and future Ukraine. According to Shapoval, avoiding brain



drain and ensuring Ukrainians are equipped with necessary knowledge is key in rebuilding a future Ukraine founded on well-functioning democratic institutions. To facilitate this, the KSE is offering two programs, Memory and Conflict Studies (a multidisciplinary field concerned with how the past can be understood and remembered, and how it might impact the present transformation of societies) and Urban Studies, both aimed at covering the future need for competence within these fields. Further mentioned by Shapoval is the fact that, due to the war, many Ukrainians have left the country and are being educated elsewhere. While this partially ensures intellectual human capital is not lost, these students must be kept anchored to Ukraine through networks to ensure they will return back to help rebuild Ukraine. This is especially important in order to counter the ongoing evolution in Russia.

## Thoughts on the Role of Russia in the Region

While the recent developments in Ukraine have of course disrupted education and research in more severe and tangible ways, the situation for independent researchers in Russia has also deteriorated. Torbjörn Becker, Director of SITE, emphasized how several Russian colleagues in exile still collaborate with the FREE Network on policy work and research. Becker also further stressed how they will be paramount once Ukraine wins the war, as will the role of partnerships for a future transformation of the Russian society. Acknowledging that there are many Russians (especially amongst academics in exile) who oppose the war, Shapoval however stressed the disturbing fact that many Russians do seem to support the Russian aggression and that the role of Russia as a destructive force in the region cannot be understated. This was seconded by Tamara Sulukhia, Director of the International School of Economics at Tbilisi State University (ISET). Sulukhia argued that Russian politics slows down and disturbs the free states within the region, and hampers organizations and countries

from moving in the right direction in regard to democracy, economic evolution and integration toward Europe. Both Shapoval and Sulukhia reminded the audience that even with a Ukrainian victory, and this in a war which is defining the future of democracy in the region, Russia will persist. Russia has proven time and again, by effectively occupying 23 percent of Georgia as of 2008, with the occupation of Crimea in 2014 and with the most recent war on Ukraine, to be a real military threat to post-Soviet countries. Even though Russia losing the war would shift the power dynamics in the region, the ever-present threat of Russia is not only of military character. Russia also attempts to impact education, research and knowledge more generally by promoting a Soviet style education and by altering the reality through propaganda and false information.

While discussing the current situation of higher education within economics in Belarus, Dzmitry Kruk, Deputy Academic Director of the Belarusian Economic Research and Outreach Center (BEROC), regularly came back to the negative impacts from Russia on the quality of education and research. Where the western style education is free but also differential, the Soviet style education is centred around learning how to fulfil instructions, according to Kruk. The Belarusian educational system is anchored to Russia and as a result Belarusians today have what Kruk referred to as a “spoilt mental map”. The necessity of free education and research outside the Russian alternative (which is mainly published in Russian and with a post-Marxist view on the world) is vital in order to equip people with the tools to respond to the new types of dictatorship evident in the region. Young people within academia who have experienced freedom and have had the opportunity of thinking for themselves will also be vital on the future path toward democracy. Kruks opinions were furthered by Shapoval stating how education must and should counter the risk of brain washing in the region and in the world as a whole. Shapoval argued the necessity of countering propaganda with the help not only of



education, but also legislation of media and social media and enforcement of international laws in general. The necessity of ensuring new values for intellectuals and students in times to come is of paramount value and, according to Shapoval, as important to halt the Russian imperialist visions today as it was some thirty years ago. Shapoval further argued that the threat from Russia's ambitions, should be met not only with education and research but also through installing a sense of hope and prosperity among young people.

## Investments into Education and Research as a Safeguard and Development Driver

While countries within the turbulent region differ, not least in regard to overall political ambitions and structure, in most of them investments into education and research have been paying off. KSE expertise allowed it to work closely with the Ukrainian government, standing strong in their fight against Russia. The impact from investments into education and research in the region is also evident in both Georgia and Latvia.

Sulukhia argued ISET to be, and to have been, a key contributor to human capital among Georgians as well as others in the Caucasus region. Sulukhia argued this to be especially important when under occupation, mentioning how Georgia have, since the occupation of the two regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in all ways possible tried to ensure that the human capital of internally displaced people is not lost. ISET have ten folded their intake of students and is today providing world class education in the Georgian language, effectively counteracting brain drain. Post-graduates are working in major institutions providing relevant knowledge and competence in key areas of not only the Georgian society but also other countries in the Caucasus. A similar picture was painted by Anders Paalzow, Rector at Stockholm School of Economics in Riga. Paalzow specifically pointed out how the investments in education made in Latvia in the 1990s have truly

paid off, with graduates having been absorbed into relevant parts of the Latvian society and the Baltics for decades.

Having previous students in key positions of society to ensure sound policy work (such as good fiscal and audit control of the countries in question etc.) is however not the only benefit of investing in education and research within the region. As emphasized by Sulukhia, institutes within the FREE Network and other networks alike are strategically vital in the sense that they ensure knowledge and evidence for policy makers and as they convey evidence-based messages for the general public. This is especially important in a time where the message of the developmental direction for the countries within the region has to be reinforced in order to stand against Russian misinformation and propaganda as well as voices questioning the benefits from European integration. Sulukhia emphasized how it is of importance that the relevance of education and research is rooted among the people and not only within academia to evade the risk of preaching to the choir. Vlad Myhnenko, Fellow at St. Peter's College at the University of Oxford, further argued it is necessary for academia to be much more policy oriented than what is the reality today. Researchers should comment on political events and public policy to ensure the outreach of knowledge and information, not just to help the public have a greater understanding of complex issues but also to help inform experts. According to Myhnenko, other researchers are keen on getting context-relevant knowledge and insights from economists working within the region.

The necessity of communicating the outcomes from investments within economics education and research and more broadly within social sciences was a recurring theme during the conference. Presenting the University's engagement in various programs such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, The European Strategy for Universities etc., Professor Agnieszka Chłoń-Domińczak from the Warsaw School of Economics (WSE) outlined the importance of funding from the EU. Chłoń-





Domińczak highlighted how EU support have enabled greater partnerships and internationalization and pointed out that while transfer of knowledge and internationalization of students and researchers are of essence, there is a need for also ensuring capacity building among other staff when building sound institutions. Internationalization through exchange as a hedge against brain drain and as a means of improving the quality of academia was further emphasized by Michal Myck, Director of CenEA.

Chłóń-Domińczak, alongside Paalzow and the Swedish Ambassador to Poland, Stefan Gullgren, further argued the necessity to bridge between business and academia. This especially as investments in social sciences, as compared to investments in natural sciences or technology cannot be commercialized. Additionally, the former have payoffs in the long run which lowers investment incentives for firms making it even more crucial to communicate the large benefits to society of investments into the sphere. Ensuring consistent and continued support requires not only a good connection to businesses but also proper legal structures in place. As argued by Gullgren, the Swedish model with private businesses funding about 70 percent of research and education in Sweden, is made possible largely thanks to the fact that many investments are funnelled through foundations that are exempt from taxation when set up to finance research grants and education. Thus, one should consider not only business, academia and investors when thinking about future funding for research and education, but the legislative framework as well, especially in contexts such as the future rebuild of Ukraine.

As for how the benefits from investments into social sciences best are communicated, opinions shifted between participants throughout the day. On the one hand, Becker's arguments of being visible not only in traditional media but on social media alike was met by Shapoval, highlighting the need for regulatory framework of both platforms. On the other hand, Myhnenko's arguments of

more policy oriented and outreaching research was met by Kruk claiming there is a risk of researchers within economics deviating too far from research within the field. Kruk also addressed the argument of being available on social media by countering that in his view, researchers should refrain from work based on what generates clicks or reads.

## The Relevance of the FREE Network in times of War

Considering the evidence brought forth during the conference by colleagues within the FREE Network, be it the suppression of BERO in their efforts of founding a School of Economics in Belarus, the effects on the KSE from the war on Ukraine, or the rise of anti-European expressions in Georgia, the necessity of the network was at the end of the day perhaps clearer than ever. As highlighted by virtually all speakers during the conference, internationalization through networks such as the FREE Network fosters open minds, allows for improvements within all aspects of academia, and enables exchange of thoughts, ideas and experiences. Although the heterogeneity of the region should not be overlooked and investments made in accordance to this, the similarities between the countries within the FREE Network outnumber the differences. The immediate threat from Russia must be met with knowledge and fact-based information as well as high-quality education and research being made available among the population in the region as a whole. To ensure a continued transition within the region, the risk of brain drain must be evaded through continuous support to the social sciences, as these have the power to truly transform nations.

## Concluding Remarks

The FREE Network public conference in Warsaw was the first in-person conference since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The benefits of meeting in person was however overshadowed by the ongoing Russian aggression on Ukraine and



ultimately on democratic ideals, including those of independent academia. We hope to welcome all FREE Network institutes to next year's conference in Kiev, to further discuss how outstanding education and research can help rebuild a sovereign Ukraine.

## List of Participants

**Torbjörn Becker**, Director of **SITE**

**Agnieszka Chłoń-Domińczak**, Professor at **WSE**

**Stefan Gullgren**, Swedish Ambassador to Poland

**Dzmitry Kruk**, Deputy Academic Director, **BEROC**

**Michał Myck**, Director of **CenEA**

**Vlad Mykhnenko**, Fellow, St. Peter's College, **University of Oxford**

**Anders Paalzow**, Rector **SSE Riga**

**Nataliia Shapoval**, Vice President for Policy Research at **KSE**

**Tamara Sulukhia**, Director of **ISET**





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The Forum for Research on Eastern Europe and Emerging Economies is a network of academic experts on economic issues in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union at BEROE (Minsk), BICEPS (Riga), CEFIR (Moscow), CenEA (Szczecin), KEI (Kiev) and SITE (Stockholm). The weekly FREE Network Policy Brief Series provides research-based analyses of economic policy issues relevant to Eastern Europe and emerging markets. Opinions expressed in policy briefs and other publications are those of the authors; they do not necessarily reflect those of the FREE Network and its research institutes.